The Honoring of Parents
Ephesians 6:1-4
May 8, 1977

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

My text this morning is Exodus 20:11, the Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you." I would like to lay beside this text two others: One, a doublet from that charming wit, Ogden Nash, "Children aren't happy with nothing to ignore,
So that's what parents were created for.", -
the other, not nearly so charming; a statement by a 75 year old: "When I was young I used to think that more than anything else old people must be scared of dying. But now I'm old and I'm more scared of living. What will I do if I get hurt or really sick? All I can do is hope I die quickly." (Trends, April 1972).

Those are the boundaries, if you will, for a Mother's Day Sermon on the Honoring of Parents: the initial Biblical injunction, the traditional relationship between parents and children which requires grace and a sense of humor more than anything else, and a major concern which is currently presenting itself to our society in gigantic proportions - and which is most significant for the institution of the family - the whole matter of aging in America.

First, the Bible - the Fifth Commandment. "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you." The Ten Commandments were received by the tribes of Israel in the midst of their wandering through the Sinai wilderness. Prior to the Sinai episode it is not accurate to refer to them as a nation. For generations they had been a loose federation of tribes dwelling in Egypt. After the Exodus, during the wanderings, the idea of nationhood was born among them. The importance of the Ten Commandments is as the initial, founding, legal framework for a new nation. They are the ten building blocks for an entirely new society in which God would reign as King, and in which His will would be done. They are more important, that is to say, than rules for everyday conduct. They are the principals upon which God's people would live their corporate life, and upon which the rest of their new society, its customs, traditions and institutions, would be built.

The principal to which the Fifth Commandment points might be expressed like this: the family unit is the basic element of our society: it must be preserved, protected, nurtured and appreciated. The institution of marriage, for instance, was so highly valued in Israelite culture that somewhere in the law it is forbidden for a newly married soldier to be sent away to war for a period of time after the wedding: a wise custom if there ever was one! In any event, the family is the foundation of Judaic culture and religion. The posture of children within that system was based on obedience to one's father primarily, loyalty to the family business or trade and respect for both parents. There are many Old Testament references which document the seriousness with which that was taken. In Exodus 21, for instance, the death penalty is prescribed for anyone who strikes a parent. And in Leviticus 20:19 the same punishment is mandated for cursing a parent.

Old Testament scholarship suggests that the respectful and obedient model of childhood was so prevalent in early Judaic culture that it would not have been necessary to build it into the Ten Commandments. The scholars suggest that the real target of the Fifth Commandment was not children at all, but adults burdened with an elderly parent. It is, in this context, a thinly disguised warning against the heathen practice of abandoning the elderly when they were incapable of caring for themselves. (The Interpreters Bible, Vol. 1 p. 985).

The real intent of the Fifth Commandment, therefore, is not simply that children treat their parents politely, but a whole, stable societal system in which age is honored and in which all the elderly are regarded as parents who must be valued and cared for - for the health of the entire culture. The promise which is attached to the commandment, "that your days may be long in the land the Lord your God has given you", was self-actualizing. If the system is structured in this manner, it will respect, honor and care for you when you reach old age.

Many centuries later, the life of Jesus of Nazareth is illustrative. He was a part of the system which resulted from the Fifth Commandment. No record exists of His first thirty years, but the best historical deductions are that Joseph died long before Jesus arrived at the age of thirty. According to the accepted practice of the day Jesus would have learned His father's trade, and upon his death assumed the business and the role of head of the house. It is likely that those thirty years, therefore, were spent in the carpenter shop and caring for His mother and brothers and sisters. The Gospel narrative indicates clearly that Jesus continued to care for His mother during His public ministry. No better, nor touching illustration of Jewish family solidarity exists than our Lord, near death, remembering to ask His dear friend John to care for His mother.

reduce this section

Jesus expressed the best of His culture, but in His teaching and His life He added a rather new dimension. Jesus focused on children, not merely as appendages to their parents whose existence was to obey and honor and respect, but as persons in their own right. In His teaching children became an occasional example of how moral life should be lived: childlikeness, in His words, became the model for the faithful adult. One time, when He was very tired His disciples did what adults are always doing - they kept the children away. He caught them at it and reversed their decision and welcomed the company of the little ones.

What we see emerging in the teaching of Jesus then is something rather unique. William Barclay calls it the principal of reciprocity: parents have obligations to their children: society has certain duties vis-a-vis its little ones. Thus in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, in the text we read this morning, he said: "Children, obey your parents:...fathers, do not provoke your children." Parenting, suddenly, in the context of the Gospel, became a two-way street. And, according to Barclay, nowhere has the Christian faith had a more dramatic influence in history than in the treatment of children.

The Roman world, in which Jesus lived did not esteem children very highly. As a matter of fact the culture did not place moral demands on parents at all. Babies that were not wanted were simply discarded. The Roman historian Tacitus muses about the fact that the Jews don't "expose" children. What he meant was that the Jews didn't practice the Roman custom of abandoning unwanted children to the elements. In that world the idea that parents had duties toward their children was revolutionary indeed.

In our world that thesis is commonly accepted. There are laws against child abuse, for instance: restrictions on society as a whole in the labor market, and upon parenting in the tragic matter of physical neglect and abuse.

(+) The primary motif about the contemporary American family, however, is that things aren't what they used to be. Change has occurred rapidly and dramatically and we aren't at all sure when or where the situation will stabilize. If you read at all you know the common anxiety about the institution of the family. Part of it is not

4 transitions - see note p 2

new at all. For instance, listen to this broadside. "The world is passing through troublous times. The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age. They talk as if they know everything and what passes for wisdom with us is foolishness with them. As for the girls, they are forward, immodest and unwomanly in speech, behavior and dress." Sounds as contemporary as my own dinner table. It was written 703 years ago, in 1274, by a preacher with the curious name, Peter the Hermit. (The Ten Commandments for Today, William Barclay, p.59).

I'm unconvinced that there is anything new about the generation gap except the vocabulary in which it is expressed. Nor am I convinced that there is much new knowledge on what is to be done about it apart from the time honored virtues of love, forgiveness, acceptance, humor and above all, patience. "This, too, will pass." St. Theresa promised, and it will.

What I am certain about is that there are major sociological changes in process and that being a family today is different from what it has ever been before. The traditional functions of the home have been taken away, one by one, and assumed by other institutions in our culture. School alone demands a total time commitment for young people, from early morning till late in the evening. The home seems, at times, to have been reduced to a twenty-four hour laundramat, quick food service, youth hostel. And even if all that were not true television alone will consume a total 17,000 hours out of the life of the average American high school student. That's 17,000 hours, regardless of the quality of the television that is watched, taken away from other activities which normally would have been the domain of the family. We shall overcome, however. I am concerned but not distressed about the family. I see thoughtful, loving, sensitive people getting the job of parenting done rather well.

My deeper concern is in another direction: the direction suggested by the Fifth Commandment: "Honor your father and mother." The high mobility of American culture has produced dislocation, uprooting and isolation on a scale unprecedented since our ancestors stopped following the wild game and settled down to plant corn. The victims of the now legendary American mobility, I would submit, are primarily the elderly. They are the ones deprived of extended families. If the institution of the family is in trouble in our culture, it is at the older rather than the younger perimeter.

Ten per cent of our population is over 65. That's 22.5 million people. A full one-third of them live beneath the poverty level. About a decade ago our society suddenly acknowledged that it had a problem. Senior Citizen began appearing on the covers of Time and Newsweek. Sociologists, psychologists, politicians told us clearly: - growing old in America is a problem. The real problem, I submit, is the culture itself: the culture which has forgotten its own precious roots and has declined to esteem and care for its own elderly. Remember, that is the intent of the Fifth Commandment.

Robert Browning held up the classic, romantic ideal in a poem you have heard:

"Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was made;
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, 'A whole I planned: Youth shows
but half: trust God; see all; nor be afraid. "

The Best is yet to be? Hardly - at least for many elderly people. More to the point is a line out of Macbeth:

> "That which should accompany old age,
> love, obedience, troops of friends,
> I must not look to have."

One of the reasons why the Best has been for many elderly people is that this culture is obsessed with youth and really doesn't know what to do with people over sixty-five. Listen to how one writer expressed it: "Dropping out of the productive cycle at sixty-five can be traumatic. You work and work at a job for forty years, feeling needed, important, indispensable. Then suddenly it's over. Vacation begins and it never ends. No alarm pumps up the adrenalin that begins the process of making you face the world and yourself that day, or next week, or next month, or ever again. Nor does anything end the day. No bell or whistle or even "happy hour" after work sends you back to home and hearth and family." (Trends, op.cite.)

What a waste of human productivity simply to assume that retirement from work must occur at 65, involuntarily. What a waste if this Church and Paul Spierling had not experienced ten good years of ministry together after he was 65. How much poorer the parish would be without Art Romig. It isn't necessary, the physicians tell us. The last time I saw Harry Cotton we shared a plane seat and he was on his way to a trout fishing expedition by horseback, after he had delivered one of the most cogent, energetic sermons I've ever heard.

"Honor your father and your mother": esteem the elderly: they are the mothers and fathers of your culture. Part of our problem is the image our culture assigns to the elderly. In simpler times, when families lived close together, grandparents, aunts and uncles played a vital role in the life of the whole family. Urbanization, and mobility have ended that, and in the absence of the traditional role the image of the elderly in America has become condescending.

Not long ago I walked in on a rerun of a television show I had never seen before and have no intent of seeing again. The episode took place on a cruise; the passengers were all retired people. The humor, which essentially consisted of poking fun at old age, was atrocious, full of cruel stereotypes. Mindless parodies of old age occur with some frequency on television, and when I see them I get angry.

The image, I believe, needs to be changed. Those of us under 65 need to help change it, but those of you who are over 65 are the ones who can make it happen.

This culture needs you. You have a sense of history which the rest of us can't have yet. You have seen more and lived through more great events than any generation before you. You witnessed events people my age have only read about. And don't bother telling us that your memory is slipping. The only thing for which you will be excused is the fact that you have so much more to remember. In fact, because your education relied much more heavily on memorization than mine, you can remember more and better than I can. That thesis, by the way, was tried by a Michigan neurologist recently. He asked a group of fifty people in their 80's and 90's to memorize a section of the Congressional Record. Then he asked 50 college students to memorize the same material. Without exception the people in their 80's and 90's memorized more swiftly and with greater ease than their younger counterparts. And their recall was more accurate over a longer period of time. Don't tell us that your memory is going bad. Because it isn't!

Artur ?

Age gives you a wisdom and grace that is deserving of honor. James Hilton in Goodbye, Mr. Chips, wrote, "One of the joys of growing older is that you bother less about a lot of little things and care more about a few big things." I was delighted to discover a charming vignette about Arthur Rubenstein in a recent edition of New York Magazine - (1-17-77). Someone had told the master that at 80 he was playing better than ever. He said, "I think so. Now I take chances I never took before. You see, the stakes are not so high. I can afford it. I used to be so much more careful. No wrong notes. Not too bold ideas. Now I let go and enjoy myself and to hell with everything except the music." - Erikson

AMR paper here.

And finally, in terms of perspective and faith, age - I have concluded, has it all over youth. One of the special bonuses of the ministry is that a week never goes by without the opportunity of learning that. I was at the bedside of an 85 year old woman recently who is nearly blind. The light conversation turned to hospital food - to the breakfast she had eaten. And suddenly she asked me, "Did you ever think how wonderful an egg is? How it turns into a chicken with feathers and bones and beak?" Well, in a way, I suppose I hadn't thought about that - for a long time anyway. I'm too busy eating and reading and worrying about the day ahead. But she who, by my rough calculations probably cracked 20,000 eggs in her life, could still stand in awe before the magnificent and mysterious processes of God's creation. And so I prayed with her - and I thanked God later for her wisdom which I need so badly.

It is time to say out loud what all of us know in our hearts: that when needs are added up, older people need younger people but perhaps not nearly as much as younger people need older people: that there is deep truth and importance in the ancient injunction, "Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land the Lord your God has given you."

We need one another. The Best - can be - yet to come.

Amen.

Eternal God, we are grateful for Your good gift of life: for people to love and care for; for parents and aunts and uncles and all those whose wisdom and stature is increased by age. Make us one family, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.